

## WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

### EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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#### HOW MUCH GOVERNMENT DO WE NEED? CATHOLIC THOUGHT GIVES NUANCED ANSWER

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

As we enter another campaign season, candidates and others are sharing their views on the role of government at the local, state, and national levels. This year especially, the role government plays in society is a hot topic of discussion. In many races candidates are making it the defining issue.

The question of how much government we need and the related issues of just how much the state should guide economic and social policy are not new to Catholics. The Church has long engaged these conversations.

At regular intervals popes have taken up the question in their “social encyclicals”, starting in 1891 when Leo XIII did so in his letter, *Rerum novarum*. The insights they offer are helpful, but partisans on both sides of the debate won’t find them satisfying. Anyone who wants the Church to endorse minimalist government will be disappointed. So will those who favor involving government in every nook and cranny of society. Catholic thought and teaching expresses a more nuanced view.

Pope John XXIII expressed this “neither/nor” position rather well in his 1961 encyclical, *Mater et magistra*. As he discussed the balance between private initiative and public intervention in economic life, Pope John wrote the following:

“It should be stated at the outset that in the economic order first place must be given to the personal initiative of private citizens working either as individuals or in association with each other in various ways for the furtherance of common interests.” (#51)

In the next paragraph, the Pope added this:

“But—for reasons explained by our predecessors—the civil power must also have a hand in the economy. It has to promote production in a way best calculated to achieve social progress and the well-being of all citizens.” (#52)

Reflecting on practical experience, he observed, “there can be no such thing as a well-ordered and prosperous society unless individual citizens and the State co-operate in the economy. Both sides must work together in harmony, and their respective efforts must be proportioned to the needs of the common good...” (#56)

Pope John pressed further on this need for balance. Government cannot stifle the individual because “where personal initiative is lacking, political tyranny ensues and, in addition, economic stagnation in the production of a wide range of consumer goods and of services... which are in a great measure dependent upon the exercise and stimulus of individual creative talent.” (#57)

But, he added, “Where, on the other hand, the good offices of the State are lacking or deficient, incurable disorder ensues: in particular, the unscrupulous exploitation of the weak by the strong...” (#58)

These words don’t provide partisans on either side of today’s debates with a club to use against their opponents. And voters looking for guidance on whom to support in November won’t find a clear answer to that question either. What our Catholic tradition does provide is a useful reminder that the debate over the proper role of government is a complex question. And we shouldn’t answer that question by calculating our narrow self-interest, but rather by discerning what is good for all of society.

And that is just what “faithful citizens” are expected to do.

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